

# Cap'n Warren's Wards

By JOSEPH C. LINCOLN

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## CHAPTER XV.—Continued.

His niece was expecting him. She had anticipated his visit and was prepared for it. From the emotion caused by his departure after the eventful birthday she had entirely recovered or thought she had. Stephen's ridicule and Mrs. Corcoran Dunn's congratulations on riddance from the "encumbrance" shamed her and stilled the reproaches of her conscience. Mrs. Dunn, as always, played the diplomat and mingled just the proper quantity of comprehending sympathy with the congratulations.

"I understand exactly how you feel, my dear," she said. "You have a tender heart, and it pains you to hurt any one's feeling, no matter how much they deserve to be hurt. You feel that you may have been too harsh with that guardian of yours. You remember what you said to him and forget how hypocritically he behaved toward you. I can't forgive him that. I may forget how he misrepresented Malcolm and me to you—that I may even pardon in time—but to deceive his own brother's children and introduce into their society a creature who had slandered and maligned their father—that I never shall forget or forgive. And you'll excuse my frankness, dear—you should never forget or forgive it either. You were a brave girl, and if you are not proud of yourself I am proud of you."

So when her uncle was announced Caroline was ready. She entered the library and acknowledged his greeting with a distant bow. He regarded her kindly, but his manner was grave.

"Well, Caroline," he began, "I got your letter."

"Yes, I presumed you did."

"Um-hm. I got it. It didn't surprise me what you wrote, because I'd seen the news in the papers, but I was hopin' you'd tell me yourself, and I'm real glad you did. I'm much obliged to you."

"I—I gave you my reasons for writing," she said. "Although I do not consider that I am in any sense duty bound to refer matters other than financial to you; and, although my feelings toward you have not changed—still, you are my guardian, and—and—"

"I understand. So you're really engaged to Mr. Dunn?"

"Yes."

"And you're callin' to marry him?"

"One might almost take that for granted," impatiently.

"Almost, yes. Not always, but generally, I will give in. You're goin' to marry Malcolm Dunn, why?"

"Why, because I choose, I suppose."

"Um-hm! Are you sure of that?"

"Am I sure?" indignantly. "What do you mean?"

"I mean are you sure that it's because you choose, or because he does, or maybe because his mother does?"

She turned angrily away. "If you came here to insult me!" she began. He interrupted her.

"No, no!" he protested gently. "Insultin' you is the last thing I want to do. But, as your father did put you in my charge, I want you to bear with me while we talk this over together. Remember, Caroline, I ain't bothered you a great deal lately. I shouldn't now if I hadn't thought 'twas necessary. So please don't get mad, but answer me this: Do you care for this man you've promised to marry? Enough to live with him all your life and see him every day and be to him what a true wife ought to be? See him, not with his company manners on or in his automobile, but at the breakfast table and when he comes home tired and cross maybe? When you've got to be forbearin' and forgiving?"

"He is one of my oldest and best friends," she interrupted. Her uncle went on without waiting for her to end the sentence.

"I know," he said. "One of the oldest, that's sure. But friendship, 'cordin' to my notion, is somethin' so small in comparison that it hardly counts in the manifest. Married folks ought to be friends, sartain sure, but they ought to be a whole lot more'n that. I'm an old bach, you say, and ain't had no experience. That's true, but I've been young, and there was a time when I made plans. However, she died, and it never came to nothin'. But I know what it means to be engaged, the right kind of engagement. It means that you don't count yourself at all, not a bit. You're ready, each of you, to give up all you've got—your wishes, comfort, money and what it'll buy and your life, if it should come to that, for that other one. Do you care for Malcolm Dunn like that, Caroline?"

She answered defiantly.

"Yes, I do," she said.

"You do. Well, do you think he feels the same way about you?"

"Yes." With not quite the same promptness, but still defiantly.

"You feel sartin of it, do you?"

She stamped her foot. "Yes, yes, yes!" she cried. "Oh, do say what you came to say and end it!"

Her uncle rose to his feet.

"Why, I guess likely I've said it," he observed. "When two people care for each other like that they ought to be married, and the sooner the better. I knew that you'd been lonesome and

troubled, maybe, and all I can say is that I'm awful glad for you. God bless you, my dear! I hope you'll be as happy as the day is long."

His niece gazed at him, bewildered and incredulous. This she had not expected.

"Thank you," she stammered. "I did not know—I thought—"

"Of course you did—of course. Well, then, Caroline, I guess that's all. I won't trouble you any longer. Good-by."

He turned toward the door, but stopped, hesitated and turned back again.

"There is just one thing more," he said solemnly. "I don't know I ought to speak, but—I want to—and I'm goin' to. And I want you to believe it! I do want you to!"

"What is it?" she demanded.

"Why—why, just this, Caroline. This is a tough old world we live in. Things don't always go on in it as we think they'd ought to. Trouble comes to everybody, and when it looks right sometimes it turns out to be all wrong. If—

if there should come a time like that to you and Steve, I want you to remember that you've got me to turn to. No matter what you think of me, what folks have made you think of me, just remember that I'm waitin' and ready

to help you all I can. Any time I'm ready—and glad. Just remember that, won't you, because— Well, there! Goodby, goodby!"

He hurried away. She stood gazing after him, astonished, a little frightened and not a little disturbed and touched. His emotion was so evident, his attitude toward her engagement was so different from that which she had anticipated, and there was something in his manner which she could not understand. He had acted as if he pitied her. Why? It could not be because she was to marry Malcolm Dunn. If it were that she resented his pity of course. But it could not be that, because he had given her his blessing. What was it? Was there something else—something that she did not know and he did? Why was he so kind and forbearing and patient?

All her old doubts and questionings returned. She had resolutely kept them from her thoughts, but they had been there, in the background, always. When, after the long siege, she had at last yielded and said "yes" to Malcolm she felt that that question at least was settled. She would marry him. Had not Mrs. Dunn told her over and over again what a good son he was and what a kind heart he had and how he worshiped her? Oh, she ought to be a very happy girl! Of course she was happy. But why had her uncle looked at her as he did? And what did he mean by hinting that when things looked right they sometimes were all wrong? She wished Malcolm was with her then; she needed him.

She heard the clang of the elevator door; then the bell rang furiously. She heard Evans hasten to answer. Then, to her amazement, she heard her brother's voice.

"Caroline!" demanded Stephen. "Caroline! Where are you?"

He burst into the room, still wearing his coat and hat and carrying a traveling bag in his hand.

"Oh!" he exclaimed, "you're all right then! You are all right, aren't you?"

"All right? Why shouldn't I be all right? What do you mean? And why are you here?"

"Why am I here?" he repeated.

"Yes. Why did you come from New Haven?"

"Why, because I got the telegram, of course! You expected me to come, didn't you?"

"I expected you? Telegram? What telegram?"

"Why, the—Good Lord, Caro, what are you talking about? Didn't you know they telegraphed me to come home at once? I've pretty near broke my neck, and the taxicab man's, getting here from the station. I thought you must be very ill or something worse."

"They telegraphed you to come here? Who—Edwards, you may take Mr. Warren's things to his room."

When they were alone she turned again to her brother.

"Now, Steve," she said, "sit down and tell me what you mean. Who telegraphed you?"

"Stephen Warren, have you been to him? Have you?"

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"Why am I here?" he repeated.

"Why, old Sylvester, father's lawyer I've got the message here somewhere. No, never mind; I've lost it, I guess. He wired me to come home as early as possible this morning. Said it was very important. And you didn't know anything about it?"

"No, not a thing."

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